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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from us to you and from you to us.

Where to start, where to start...

A few appologies and many thanks.

To everybody out there, sorry for the delay in getting this issue out to you. The move of the production from California to Oregon has taken longer than at first thought, but isn't that life. Also getting the final arrangements on the printing of YARF! here in Oregon took some very hard negotiations but we feel that it will be worth it, for it will help to keep the costs down and to be able to bring the best to you with each issue.

And thanks... Many, many thanks are in order to Lance Rund for all the help over the last two plus years, and for his encouragement on YARF! Lance has brought many contributions to YARF! (the redesigned table of contents, the idea of using computer art on the back cover and the logo for Last Bits). We are hoping that Lance will be able to contribute more in the future, including new sayings for the characters in Last Bits, some new art for the back cover and continuing with the stories of Kathy that he started a while back and we keep getting asked about. No doubt about it, we look forward to Lance being with us in the future. Thanks again.

From the Weekly World News by way of the Portland Oregonian of June 24th...

A 3-year-old cat that swallowed a batch of toxic chemicals has been coughing up **flaming hairballs**, according to her owner and the local fire department in Detroit MI.

The fiery feline has already set pet owner Laura Stevens' apartment ablaze three times. Every time the poor cat coughs up one of these hairballs soaked in the flammable compounds, explained a local veterinarian, Frank Southworth, "the friction from the roughness of her tongue ignites the hair."

In other happenings. We hope that everybody has had a chance to see Warner Brothers' Tiny Toon Adventures How I Spent My Summer Vacation. This is just an uproariously funny 90 minuets. Batman Returns has hit the screens and was worth the wait an excellent continuation on the original, (and Catwoman is superb). Cool World from the Bakshi Studios is also now out and is a demented romp through the world of animation, sort of Roger Rabbit on drugs.

New comics out that everyone should look for from MU Press in Seattle are: "ZU" an anthology title with works from Ken Macklin, Deal Whitley & Monika Livingston, Cathy Hill, Jay Shell, Terrie Smith & Dean Graf, Tracy Kazaleh and many other. "Beauty of the Beast" a pin-up style book with works from Reed Waller, Phil Foglio, Diana Vick, Monika Livingston, Mike Raabe, Eric Elliot and many, many others. "Shanda the Panda" a collaboration of the two Mikes, Sagara and Curtis, is just plain good and highly recommended. The next issue of "RedShetland" from GraphXpress in Tucson should be out on the stands by the time most of you read this. The same should hold true for "Albedo" from Antarctic.

Finances, let's just say that with the donation of \$1,000.00 and with a very good ConFurence and with back issue orders all but draining the current available supplies...the bank account is looking good right at the moment. Thanks go to our anonymous donor as well as all of you out there for new subscriptions and back orders. Nuff said.

DEADLINES!!!

Not something that we want to think about...miserable things but what the hey, we've all got to them.

By the time you get this issue, issue 22 will be well into production. So we'll skip that one and go to the new schedule, as follows:

Issue 23	August 15, 1992	WorldCon maybe?
Issue 24	October 3, 1992	
Issue 25	November 25, 1992	
Issue 26	January 9, 1993	ConFurence

These are pretty much firm dates, but aren't set in stone. Again with the move in production the dates had to change a little. Remember there will be no change in anyones subscription as subscriptions are for issues not calendar periods.

If you should have any questions feel free to give us a call at our Portland phone, (503)-230-0589. WE'll get back with you as soon as we can.

Patten's Pontifications

Book Review and the like, from Fred Patten

Horse Fantastic, edited by Martin H. Greenberg & Rosalind M. Greenberg. New York, DAW Books, December 1991, 314 pages, \$4.50; ISBN 0-88677-504-3.

DAW Books' two Catfantastic anthologies must be successful, because now we have Horse Fantastic to the same formula. These are seventeen brand-new stories about fantastic horses: ghostly horses, demonic horses, talking horses, horses of the gods, extraterrestrial horses, horses that turn into people and people that turn into horses, horse statues that come to life, Biblical horses, and more, including one tale each of a unicorn and a pegasus. There are horses in urban New York City, horses on the racetrack, horses on the rodeo circuit, horses in primitive cultures, and horses in a variety of mythical lands. Mercedes Lackey has a new short story in her Kingdom of Valdemar setting, "Stolen Silver"; and Mary Stanton's "The Horse Boy" brings her Courts of The One Hundred and Five to ancient Baghdad.

However, Horse Fantastic is more tenuously related to anthropomorphic literature than is Catfantastic. That series features more stories in which the cat is the protagonist or the motivator, or is characterized with human intelligence. Most of these Horse Fantastic stories feature humans as their main characters, who have some personal problem created or solved by an encounter with a benevolent or a malevolent magical horse. The horse may be the catalyst but most of the reacting is done by the human. Nancy Springer's "The Most Magical Thing About Rachel" is the only story among the seventeen in which anthropomorphized horses play more than a bit role. Unless you choose to shelve Horse Fantastic along with Catfantastic as a set, you will have a hard time justifying keeping this in your anthropomorphic library. It is enjoyable reading, but it's mostly not morph fiction.

• • •

Cats in Space, and Other Places, edited by Bill Fawcett. Riverdale, New York, Baen Books, May 1992, 407 pages, \$4.99; ISBN 0-671-72118-6.

If anyone doubts that felineoids are the preferred animals of most s-f writers, just consider how many anthologies of cat s-f & fantasy stories there are compared to those which feature any other animal. Cats in Space contains sixteen stories and one poem, written from 1939 (A. E. Van Vogt's "Black Destroyer") to the present. A couple appear to be published here for the first time, but most are reprints.

Three (Fritz Leiber's "Space-Time for Springers", Ursula K. LeGuin's "Schrödinger's Cat", and Cordwainer Smith's "The

Game of Rat and Dragon") have already been included in Jack Dann's & Gardner Dozois's 1984 anthology, Magocats!, but the other fourteen are new to an animal-theme s-f anthology.

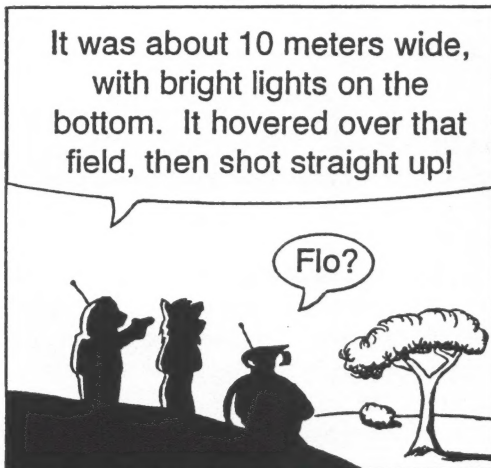
The book is divided into two sections. "Cats" contains ten stories and the poem, about normal housecats or derivatives of them, such as the bioengineered, talking, space-going Kim in Fritz Leiber's "Ship of Shadows". "Alien Cats" contains six stories about interstellar felineoids such as C. J. Cherryh's hani, Anne McCaffrey's Hrrubans, and Larry Niven's kzin (in a story by Greg Bear & S. M. Stirling, "The Man Who Would Be Kzin").

The stories are mostly science-fiction, although there are a few magical fantasies. The second part cheats a bit in that Cherryh's "Chanur's Homecoming" is not really a story. It's Chapter 12 from her novel of the same title. It's dramatic, but if you haven't already read the novel, you won't have any idea as to what's going on except that two factions of cat-people are shooting it out for control of a space station. It starts and ends on cliffhangers. It's understandable that Fawcett would want to include something about the hani in this book, since they are one of the most charismatic felineoid alien species in all s-f, but this fragment is merely confusing by itself.

A couple of other stories are also cheats in that the cats are very minor characters. David Drake's "Bullhead" is a fantasy about an early 19th-century frontiersman warlock who happens to have a talking-cat familiar in his cabin. The cat, who talks with a hillbilly accent, appears in only two brief scenes in the forty-page story. (The warlock's talking mule has a much larger role.) Robert A. Heinlein's "Ordeal in Space" uses a kitten trapped on a 35th-floor window ledge to force the ex-spaceman protagonist to reminisce about the space trauma that wrecked his career, and force him to overcome his fear of heights. The cat itself is barely in the story. As usual, this criticism is not aimed at the quality of the stories; they are fine. They are just not really cat stories.

But since they are good reading, and since the book does contain many good short stories about anthropomorphized cats (and a few other animals), it is definitely recommended. Other highlights besides those named are Cordwainer Smith's "The Ballad of Lost C'mell" and Fredric Brown's "Mouse". Morph fans will also appreciate Dean Morrissey's humorous cover painting of two alley cats about to blast off in a rocket ship constructed out of junk. If this ever becomes available as an art print, it will be on most morph fans' walls within weeks. ☹

Freefall by Mark Stanley



DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

There have in the past couple of issues been some unfortunate oversights and/or just plain goofs. So we'll see if we can't rectify some of these now.

Back in issue 17, was the story "Sundance" by Dave Bryant. The illos to that story were by Dave and inked by Susan Van Camp.

In issue 20, Jim Alves, was Assisted on the inks on Ralph the Wonder Hamster, by Roy D. Pounds II.

In issue 18/19 there was an historical error in that the Soviet Union was not formed until 1922. Sorry Eric, common mistake.

CENTAURS GATHERUM

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For nearly six years, there has been only one place to find the widest variety of Centaur-related art and literature in the world: *Centaurs Gatherum* (formerly *Centaurs Gatherum Newsletter*). Over the years, *CG* has featured over a thousand works of art and writing, by dozens of artists, including: Roy D. Pounds, Mary Lynn Skirvin Johnson, Roberta Gregory, Quinton Hoover, Melody Rondeau, Bill Fitts, Tom Verré, Heather Bruton, Steve Gallacci, Sherlock, Parsonavich, Chris Grant, Jim Groat, Kjartan Arnórsson, Scott Ruggels, and many others. Feature issues have spotlighted the art of Donna Barr and Terrie Smith. All Back issues are available. For a sample issue, send \$2.00 in U.S. funds to:

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Monika Livingston

THE INEVITABLE INTRODUCTION

• In Case of Fire, Yell "Fire" •

or,

Go ahead and read this issue's installment of "Empires" or "Buffalo Wings,"
which are probably vastly more interesting anyway

Before we take off, I'd like you to remove the little plastic card in the seat back in front of you, and go over a few things.

This novel is (shudder) a recom story. "Recom," which is a word I have studiously avoided using in the text, means "recombinant DNA"—as if most or all of you didn't know this. Why shudder? I suppose I feel about recom stories the way comic writers like Alan Moore and Frank Miller may have felt about superhero stories. The idea itself is extremely interesting, but rarely seems to live up to its potential. In both genres, the stories—many of which are quite good, mind you (I will reveal my bias by stating this is less so for the superhero ones)—aren't usually concerned with the implications of their respective backgrounds. Moore's comics struck most readers as dark and depressing. If they were, it was because they treated their fantastic premises in a relentlessly realistic fashion, and because they were just about the only books that took serious looks at moral issues arising from those premises. They were stories about theoretical ethics, if you will.

In furrydom, what talk there is of morals and ethics usually has to do with the perceived lack of them, both in the stories and the fans. This is bad for two unrelated reasons. First, when I identify myself as a furry fan, I don't want someone to identify me as a bisexual bondage bunny. Being able to talk about erotic subjects freely is a good thing, but some strive to be so open-minded that their brains are in danger of falling out. The rise of the Toon Thought Police, who seek to eradicate *all* sex, violence, adult themes, and by association most social relevance from fan art and stories, is a direct and chilling consequence of this "furry=pervert" perception.

Second, if any genre is perfect for stories dealing with morals and ethics, it is fantasy/science fiction. This is the only field left where you can still ask big questions, where avant-garde literary movements combined with the cynical in-turning of society haven't reduced fiction to a hip, knowing nihilism: God is indeed dead, but we're all too busy to attend the funeral, thank you. And what subgenre is more paradoxically appropriate than furrydom to explore the question, *What does it mean to be human?*

If you are writing a hard sf story which takes the development of bipedal, humanoid creatures developed from terrestrial animals to be a basic premise, it is going to have something in common with every other story that contains that premise. Recom tales which have had varying degrees of influence on this one include stories by Dave Bryant, Mark Merlino, Lance Rund, Lawrence Watt-Evans, and Peter Glaskowsky.

I would also like to thank friends who have served as alpha testers for this manuscript (still being written as this introduction is), in no particular order: Jimmy Chin, Barbara Cox, John and Becky Setlow, Virginia Reed, Brent Edwards, David Branson, and the Mysterious Vanishing Bill Biersdorf.

Some of the story's concepts were drawn from the book *ANIMAL THINKING* by Donald R. Griffin, and various works by Tom Regan and Joseph Campbell. Legal presentations came from watching too many episodes of "L. A. Law," so I ask for forgiveness of courtroom theatrics: Steven Bochco made me do it.

In case anyone wonders, this novel is intended for professional publication (or least professional rejection) upon completion. Imagine lots of ominous copyright warnings for another few paragraphs.

Hey, got any Twinberry sauce? ...Never mind. On with the story.

Watts Martin • 33515 Westwood Drive, Ridge Manor, FL 33525

Part One

IN OUR IMAGE
A NOVEL BY WATTS MARTIN

*Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him.
But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters.*

C. S. LEWIS

Chapter One

"Someday--I swear to hell I'm goin'ta break his neck."

Rob laughed. "You wouldn't lay a hand on him and you know it."

Kevin Brannigan just shook his head in response, shoving his hands into his pockets and taking a place near the back of the crowded monorail shelter.

"Gonna rain again tonight," Rob said.

"Surprise," Kevin grunted. The sky was darker than its normal bluish-grey smog color, but you really didn't need to look up to know it was going to rain. It had rained nearly every early summer day in Florida for thousands of years, unaffected by drought or greenhouse effect, and would assuredly continue to do so long after the state was underwater.

The sound of the train, its length suspended magnetically above its track, was only the faint noise of flexing joints between cars and, after a moment, the hiss of automatic doors opening. "You got your raincoat?" Rob inquired as the mass of commuters pressed them toward the monorail.

"Sure do, mom," Kevin said, raising his briefcase. The doors slid shut, and the train silently began to move along its street-level track toward its next stop.

"It's not that I mind the fifty hour weeks," he suddenly started. "Or the low pay. Or the broken air conditioning."

"Or the fact that a GMM raccoon could do your job more efficiently," Rob added.

"Fuck you." Kevin laughed. "They're too cheap to buy the little bastards, anyway."

"I don't know. If they could train them well enough, they'd probably break even in under ten years."

"They won't be around in ten years. And by that time their damn computers will be obsolete, anyway."

"So what then?"

"I don't know." He grinned. "Damn, Rob, I don't plan to be putting PC boards together a decade from now anyway."

"It's more secure than most jobs."

"I suppose. I suppose. But this...this isn't what I wanta be known for a century from now."

"Then what do you want to be known for?"

"Hmm? Oh, I don't know. Something....spectacular. I

don't know what. No, something that'll make a difference."

Rob coughed. "How unexpectedly altruistic of you. Have you considered curing the plague?"

Kevin chuckled a bit. "You think the 'supervaccine' they're looking for exists?"

"No. They'll have to keep dealing with each new strain one at a time. It's not going away until all the carriers die."

"That's pretty damn bleak."

"Yes, it is."

By the time they reached the transfer station the darkening haze had defined itself as distinct thunderclouds. "Looks like it's goin'ta be a real downpour," Rob said, staring up.

"What's with you and the weather today?"

"Rain just gets my spirits low, that's all." He stepped out of the train onto the platform's weathered tile floor. It wasn't a station in any real sense—just three raised decks stacked on top of one another, two tracks apiece, escalators running between them. The local monorail they had taken stopped on the top deck; above them was an angled glass roof. All of the decks were open on the sides, and the cooling wind whistled through the structure with an unvarying, dreary blue tone.

"Well, hell. It ain't Friday yet, but we might as well go on over to Hogan's," Kevin suggested.

"I—"

"Crack?" a young woman nearby inquired politely. She was dressed far too well to be from a Free Zone.

"Uh, no," Kevin said, frowning.

"People like you are destroying what's left of society," Rob told her, his tone matching her politeness perfectly, and he shoved her to one side as they moved past.

"We're the ones keeping it going," she said, her cold smile still a touch too pretty to be a sneer.

"Bitch," Rob said when she was out of their sight.

"She was probably an undercover."

Rob shook his head. "Not dressed like that. The cops still think street vendors look like punk gang members. But they look like that now. They can walk right into the office

to sell the VP his fix.

"And she's probably right. The half of the country that's not busy dying is doped up so they can't hear the screams from outside. They never want to hear the screams."

Kevin cleared his throat, fidgeting. He was no romantic himself, but in the four years he had known Robert Christensen he couldn't recall one glimmer of a positive outlook. Most everybody else you asked, they'd tell you things were getting better. Rob'd just smile and say, that's what people thought at the turn of the century. We're kept busy applauding each step forward so we don't notice the three in reverse.

They reached one of the escalators, got off on the second level. Immediately to the left was the eastbound 574 track, the monorail both would take home, a twenty-minute, fifty-mile ride for Kevin and another five minutes for Rob.

"So, how about Hogan's?" he asked after a silent moment had passed.

Rob pursed his lips. "No, I don't think so. Not tonight. Not much in the money-spending mood, I guess."

"Well, I'm goin'ta go on anyway. I think I could use it."

"You certainly look like it," Rob agreed somberly. "See you tomorrow."

"Thanks. Later, Rob." Kevin watched his friend head toward his train, then continued on the escalator down to street level.

The "streetcar" buses were considered antiquated, but then, the design for the monorail had been around decades before it was actually built. The bus he boarded looked much the same as the diesel buses his father had ridden; except for minor styling details, only the engines had changed. The huge electric motors were no more reliable than combustion drives, but electricity was cheap.

In that respect, Rob was right to be cynical. He could remember the ads touting the "new, clean" bus system that had been put into effect a year or two before he was born, and he was in elementary school when the remarkably similar ads for the "new, clean" monorail system had followed. The technology had been there since his father's time, but when being clean meant a higher operating cost you pretended the smog wasn't there.

Hogan's Bar and Grill was an old business, dating back to the turn of the century; but the shopping plaza it now sat in was only ten years old. It was small as "supermall" went, with just over three hundred stores on five open-air levels. Hogan's was on the second, with part of the dining area on a balcony overlooking the courtyard. Kevin rarely sat outside, though, and with the sky looking the way it did, it would only be inviting a thorough soak.

The usually crowded bar was almost empty. Relatively speaking, Kevin amended—any place with a full liquor license just got more popular as time went by. He made his way across the burgundy carpet to a booth along the far wall; the seat covers matched the floor. Everything in Hogan's was red or brown, from the glass lamp shades to the ersatz (but well-designed) wooden trim.

Honestly, he had probably deserved the chewing out that Simpson had given him that afternoon. But the man was simply rude. Any small mistake started a torrent of abuse, as did any new way of doing an old job—even if it was more efficient than the company-approved way. Hell, it didn't take a programming degree to see that half the redundancy checks only wasted time. There were only so many ways to oversee a computer putting together parts for other computers. There weren't too many ways to put them together to start with.

A waitress appeared, withdrawing a card-sized electronic slate from her apron (brown, of course). "Would you like something to drink?"

"You know it," he sighed. "Jack Daniels, Black, on the rocks."

Touching her finger to the slate in three places, she nodded and walked away.

"Brannigan?" a voice inquired from behind. Startled, he whirled around in his seat, looking up. Standing to one side was a tall, slim brunette, long hair and legs and a neatly trim grey business outfit. Attractive, certainly; but there was something—

"Maria?"

She laughed, nodded, and slid onto the bench across from him. "I haven't see you in...in years. Gosh. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Oh, just working," he said, smiling. It had indeed been years. He remembered her as a too skinny seventeen-year-old in his high school's graduating class. She missed graduating cum laude, but not by much; he didn't remember her as having much of a social life. She had been attractive then, too, but had been handicapped by a shyness so severe it made her almost unapproachable.

Kevin had been the sort of teenage playboy who felt his time was too valuable to spend trying to break down a wallflower's self-imposed barriers. As one of the few students known to have dared lose his virginity, he was as much a celebrity as the football team captain.

"I work at Welsh Electronics," he elaborated. "I watch circuit boards being built."

"At least it's secure." She smiled, a bit wistfully. "I've been doing accounting work, mostly. It's boring, but it's a

living. At least until the next round of layoffs."

"You people need a union."

She shrugged. "I haven't seen unions doing a whole lot to stop layoffs, Kevin. When the work just isn't there, it isn't there."

"If nothing else, you'd get to parade around your office shouting and waving signs. Gives you something to do when you're waiting for the unemployment check."

The waitress appeared again, carrying Kevin's drink, then turned to Maria for her order.

"Just iced tea, thanks."

"And do you expect a third person to appear before I come back?"

"Uh, no."

She nodded, with a slight smile, and whisked off toward the bar.

"As I remember you were quite the ladies' man," Maria said.

Kevin laughed self-consciously. "I was a flirt, I suppose."

"They said you were a lot more than that."

"That's in the way you look at 'more,' I guess." He took a sip of his drink. It was the real stuff; some places would try to give you the house whiskey when you asked for Jack. Hogan's was always honest, never watered it down and still had reasonable prices. "I can't even remember her name. We only saw each other for a half a year. Maybe less."

"That's a pretty short romance."

"For high school?"

"Especially for high school. Most couples who did that with each other that early got married."

He shrugged. "Well, we were both virgins. It's not like we were in any danger."

"As long as you were both telling the truth," she said, drumming her fingers on the table.

Maria's drink arrived, and she took a large sip, setting the glass down and gazing at one of the ice cubes with a blank expression. "That's why people were fascinated by you. Lots of us would have liked to take that sort of risk, I suppose. But we didn't. You were—"

"Never very bright," he suggested. "You know, this is a

hell of a conversation for two people who haven't seen each other in a decade."

After a second, she laughed. "Oh, come on. It's probably the most popular topic in the world. What was it that comedian used to say a few years back? 'If you can't do it, talk about it a lot.'"

"I guess." He cleared his throat. "So, are you seeing anyone now? Married?"

"No...not anymore. I was engaged to a man I had been dating for a few years."

"But things didn't work out?"

She laughed softly. "No. No, they certainly didn't."

"Did you meet him in college?"

"A year after." She smiled. "How'd you know I went to college?"

"You were one of the smartest kids in the class. Figured you'd have to end up there."

"It was just a business college. A lot of times I wish I had gone after something more...interesting. Art history. Musicology. Something in a liberal arts school."

"So go back."

"I can't afford to now. I'm barely making enough money to meet my bills as it is."

"Do you have any plans for dinner?"

Maria looked startled, then a little mournful. "I don't think...that'd be a good idea."

"Oh," he said, a little surprised. "I thought you weren't seeing anyone?"

"No. I'm not."

"How about...tomorrow?"

She smiled, but didn't say anything. Something in her eyes made Kevin draw back and look away. "I'm sorry if I was pressing," he said awkwardly.

"Well." Maria drained the last of her tea, then glanced across at him with a half-smile. "You weren't. It's not something I'm self-conscious about any more. You can live with it."

He nodded, staring into his own glass.

"It's not one of the ones they have a vaccine for. More than half of them aren't, you know."

"No, I didn't," he said softly.

She chuckled. "I've learned a lot more about it than I wanted to know."

"Didn't...." He paused, not sure if he should ask for any more information.

"Didn't he have a medical card?" she guessed. He nodded. "Yes, he did. I don't know. Maybe the girl he had just broken up with had been seeing someone else and he got it after the test, or got it a few weeks before. Maybe the test was wrong. It happens."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know. I guess I really don't care. He wasn't charged, if that's what you're asking. He was too wishy-washy to be malicious."

"How...good is your treatment?"

"It's a new one. Nobody really knows. They guess maybe thirty years, even more. It could be a lot worse. They've found twenty-nine variants now, you know; ten of them don't even have treatments. I still have a pretty good life to look forward to."

Kevin nodded again. What response was there? The transmission rate was only a fraction of what it had been a generation ago, yet the numbers were growing. He had stopped reading the figures when they passed twenty million. The vaccines would remain little more than placebos while they were only effective against some of the strains. And, as Maria would be reminded of for the rest of her life, the voluntary "checkup cards" most clinics provided were not infallible.

"Nice weather we're having," he said.

Maria stared at him, then burst into laughter.

They only stayed a few more minutes, until he finished his drink and slid his Discover card into the end of the table, holding it there until a soft chime sounded from beneath it. He withdrew the card and read the tiny lettering on its display, a wallet-sized version of the slate the waitress had recorded the orders on.

JACK DANIEL
8.50

ICE CREAM
3.00

SUBTOTAL
11.50

TRX 9%
1.04

SUBTOTAL
12.54

ADD TIP
0.00

CHARGE
12.54

RECEIPT
1034.55

[] ACCEPT [] CANCEL [] ADD TIP

He touched the tip box and gave the waitress thirteen percent, bringing the total up to \$14.17, then touched "Accept" and slid the card back into the slot. The table responded with a low, unpleasant buzz.

"Stupid sensors." He took his napkin and wiped off the part of the card sticking out of the slot, then gripped it again, making sure his thumb was firmly on the top plate. This time it chimed politely, and he withdrew the card and returned it to his wallet.

"Well, thank you," she said.

"You know, there's no reason we can't have dinner."

She shook her head. "I know. But I do have too much work to do. Maybe some other time."

"Yes. Maybe so."

They walked out of Hogan's in silence.

It was beginning to drizzle lightly by the time Maria boarded her bus, off to whatever transportation line would take her home. He realized he had forgotten to ask for her number.

The evening had reached near nine o'clock, and the streetlights had turned on, dotting the sidewalks and casting new, cold shadows across the pedestrians and bicyclists. After seven the buses dropped down to every fifteen minutes; when the clock hit nine, the frequency would drop to every half-hour, the monorails likewise.

He could go on home, but he would have nothing to do but watch video. He had seen all of the week's offerings he was interested in, and followed very few of the shows with set display times. And the appeal of interactive

channels—what he was told was the most popular form of entertainment now—was lost on him. Lecturing to millions of people on subjects you knew little about was a big thrill for most Americans; Kevin had been raised with the principle of keeping of your mouth shut unless you were sure of what you were saying.

Kevin wandered eastward along the avenue. There was something mechanical about his pattern, he realized; he had been going to Hogan's for years but had no idea of what lay beyond sight distance of the supermall and the rail platform. When he came to a side street, he took it, whistling a melancholy tune as he strolled along the sidewalk.

The shops disappeared in under a quarter-mile, to be replaced by houses on his right and—surprisingly—a large, undeveloped field on his left. Shortly after that the street was blocked by a chainlink gate, a small booth set between the two lanes to control entry and exit. The gate was set in a high, pink stucco wall, suggesting the pseudo-Spanish architecture that had been popular in Florida since the early 1900s.

A guard sat behind a plate glass window in the booth. He glanced up at Kevin every few seconds as he approached, but was intent on a monitor set into his desk.

"Hello," Kevin said when he got within ten feet.

The guard looked up and nodded perfunctorily, waiting for Kevin to get closer.

"So, what is this place?"

"Amber Woods," the guard said.

"Expensive subdivision, I take it."

"I doubt there's anyone in there who makes under six hundred grand a year."

"And I suppose I can't go walking through there, can I?"

"You planning to visit someone?"

"No."

"Unless a resident authorizes you to enter, I can't let you in."

"For security reasons."

"Job security, at least. I let you in, I get fired."

Kevin laughed. "So what happens if I take the sidewalk along the wall?"

"If you head east, you'll hit the end of the complex at 218th. It'll take a while, though, and it's pretty rough

going. Nobody's used those sidewalks since the place was built, so nobody's been taking care of them."

"Thanks."

Just out of sight of the gate, the sidewalk became overgrown and matted with weeds, the cement broken in some places, completely missing in others. Kevin guessed the land on his left was one of the county's designated "buffer zones"; without such status, the tangled, scraggly wilderness would certainly be a parking lot now.

The rain began to pick up. Opening his briefcase, he pulled out his raincoat and donned it quickly. Then he continued to make his way through the weeds, listening to the pinpricks of water droplets ricocheting off the coat's slick surface.

As he walked along the unkempt rawness around him, the knee-high grass with brambly vines, pine trees and fallen branches made the battered sidewalk an incongruous ribbon through a new and slightly unfamiliar world. Nature customarily came prepackaged, carefully cultivated in parks and zoos. In this buffer, though, there might be wild foxes or raccoons. Some probably lived in Amber Woods—the prices suggested real fields and copses surrounding the homes. In less upscale neighborhoods, no matter how cleverly designed, the temptation to pack as many people into as small an area as possible guaranteed the only "wildlife" would be an occasional squirrel.

Kevin leaned up against the stucco wall, the clearest—and somehow silliest—reminder of civilization nearby, and gazed out at the darkening woods. Palmetto bushes quickly lost themselves among oak trees and tall pines, and if he was very quiet he could hear the sounds of birds and small animals scurrying between them. It was waking time for the larger, nocturnal animals. He wondered if he might actually see one; he had never seen a fox outside a park.

Thunder clapped from above, and the rain's intensity increased. Regretfully, Kevin hurried eastward, gazing hopefully at the woods at each sound or imagined movement.

What stopped him again, though, illuminated by a distant flash of lightning, was something on the wall. It was a spattered trail of blood.

It was fresh, running a little in the rain's onslaught, and it made a straight, dotted line from the top of the wall to a point about three feet off the ground. A much larger stain marked the top, with a few medium-sized splotches along the length.

He walked closer, resting his fingers on the wall's rough surface. It was only about seven feet high; he could pull himself high enough to see over it, to see if there were any

stains on the other side.

Reaching up, he felt carefully along the top. His hand met a sharp point. He traced his finger across the shape; it was a thin spike, about two inches high. He moved his hand to either side. The spikes were set every two inches. Between each was something rough and abrasive, as if broken glass had been set in the concrete.

"Damn," he said aloud. Okay, somebody cut himself climbing the wall.

He reached up once more and felt the spike right above the stain. His fingers came away slick and red.

Okay, somebody impaled himself climbing the wall. Shit!

The rain momentarily forgotten, Kevin stood in place, trying to reconstruct what had happened here, almost certainly within the last hour. Anyone trying to scale the wall as he had—by just reaching for handholds—would have missed the spikes, and a real burglar who'd have checked out the place first would know to bring thick enough gloves that the glass wouldn't hurt. Or maybe just looped a rope around a spike and swung—of course, if he missed either way he would impale himself.

But—

The blood was on the outside. The burglar would have gotten hurt going over the fence, and bled on his way down. If he made it over the fence at all. So either someone had tried unsuccessfully to get in, or had tried successfully to get out.

If you could call getting a possibly fatal injury "successful."

He turned to face the woods immediately behind the blood, then took a few steps forward.

"Damn," he said again. It didn't take a forest ranger to see the trail that led off into the woods, at least for the ten feet or so until it became too dark to see. Whoever had run off had stumbled into every branch he could possibly hit, breaking or trampling it. He followed the path until it became too murky, then looked around, listening to small forest animals run away from his approach.

It was almost pitch-black, most of the remaining light coming from the dim haze of illumination inside the subdivision. He cursed, straining to see anything unusual, and hoped his eyes would adjust.

Then, very faintly, he heard breathing.

He held his own breath, staying motionless. It was definitely there. Deeper in the woods, a labored rasping. But it sounded more like an animal than a human. An

injured animal.

A big injured animal.

Kevin took a step in the direction of the sound, still seeing nothing. Perhaps that was just as well; he didn't know much about animals, but he was fairly sure approaching a large, wounded one could be quite dangerous.

With a loud crack, lightning flashed directly overhead, painting the scene in fleeting, brilliant colors. In that instant, as the rain became a full-fledged torrent, Kevin saw it.

It was about five feet long, as far under a bush as it could get, and it was staring at him. He got a glimpse of tan and white fur and sharp, bared teeth, wild, frightened eyes, and cuts and matted blood along its legs and arms. And something about it—

He wondered if he should try to pick it up, take it to a veterinarian; the wounds might not be fatal in themselves, but it might die of infection. He took a step closer. "Easy," he said.

The animal made no move; it might be in shock. Its breathing was loud and tortured.

When he reached a few feet away, he knelt down next to it. Another lightning flash came from overhead, and he got his second clear glimpse of the creature. And then it struck him. He had thought "legs and arms" a second earlier. It didn't have legs. It had legs... and arms.

"You're a goddamn GMM," he whispered.

He took a step closer. Genetically modified mammals weren't always dangerous, but for all he knew this one could be a guard, and it was huge. He remembered hearing about an assassination attempt in some Arabic country last month where the dictator had a companion GMM wolf about this one's size. During a speech, three armed men the GMM didn't recognize stepped out of the crowd and reached toward their weapons. Two of them were down before they even got to their guns; one died of his injuries the next day. The guy who was stupid enough to actually point his weapon at the dictator got decapitated.

But even though GMMs were often a bit larger than their natural versions, had different proportions—they never looked like this. The raccoons had arms, of sorts, hands with clumsy thumbs. But this one had the hands of a child. A furry child, perhaps—but a human child.

Kevin gulped and reached out. The creature hissed, trying to draw away; he studied it. Completely bipedal, a mane like shoulder-length hair, big, cute eyes—it was like



nothing he had seen before. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said softly. "You understand me?"

The creature—female, he decided—hissed and raised its arms, flexing nasty-looking claws.

"Look," he tried, "you're goin'ta die unless I get you some help. You want that?" She made no response. He reached a bit closer; she hissed again, sounding a bit uncertain, but kept her claws out, her eyes on his face. "I'm goin'ta pick you up now," he said carefully. As soon as his fingers touched her soaking, matted fur she launched herself at him, growling like a tiger. "Fuck!" he spat, scrambling away from her claws.

He sat up, blinking, raising a hand to his face. She had scratched the hell out of him, but hadn't done worse than draw a little blood. "What'd you do that for?" he said, looking over at her.

Her eyes were wide, but fierce, and her teeth were bared. Even so, she was panting heavily.

"That exhausted you? I bet you can't walk on those feet. It looks like one of them spikes went right through your left one." He dropped his hands to his lap, wondering if she could understand anything he was saying.

"Look, I'm not an animal person, but I can't just leave you out here, 'cause you'll die. Even if you know how to hunt you're not goin'ta be able to catch anything in the shape you're in. If the wounds don't get you, you'll starve."

He moved close again. She kept hissing, but didn't raise her claws. "Okay." He removed his raincoat and arranged it next to her like a bed, then slid his arms under her. She began to yowl ominously, her claws extending and pressing against his neck. "I'm really trying to help. Please don't take my head off or nothing, girl." He moved her onto the raincoat, then slid his hands under it and carefully lifted her into his arms.

She was less than a hundred pounds, her ribs traced out painfully against her chest. He realized she had human breasts, her white chest fur thinning out to a pale fuzz across them and disappearing completely on her nipples. She appeared to be some sort of cat, but they had tried to make the animal aspects so subtle as to be nearly cosmetic.

Her face was still feline, but had been changed to give almost a cartoon appearance; he guessed that, if she was in good shape, she'd be... cute, an animated character come to life.

She also had to be phenomenally expensive. What the hell was she doing out here?

And what was he going to do with her?

He hurried back along the sidewalk, wrapping her in the

raincoat so all but her face was hidden, hoping that the street wasn't too far away.

Even moving as fast as he dared go, it took ten minutes to hit the walk's end, and another five to find a bus station.

As he sat waiting for the bus under the shelter, a little voice said: You're carrying a very large, incredibly advanced GMM that doesn't belong to you, wrapped up in a raincoat. So how are you going to explain this?

"You're goin'ta be bad trouble for me, aren't you?" he said to her. She was silent, staring up at him in unmistakable fright. "Why are you so scared of me?"

He guessed that whatever type of GMM she was, it wasn't one capable of ripping through human opponents like a knife through paper. Even so, claws and teeth go a long way; if she got panicked, she could cause him serious damage, and she probably knew that.

Maybe she was afraid to.

The bus pulled into view. "Okay, I'm goin'ta have to hide you a bit, I think," he said apologetically, pulling the hood over her face.

As he boarded the bus, the driver looked at him as if he had walked right out of a horror video. Kevin tried to imagine how he must look, bleeding scratches on his face, soaked with rain and carrying a limp, covered body. If I bared my teeth at this guy I bet he'd let me have the bus, he thought.

"My... wife's... very tired," Kevin whispered, heading to a back seat. The driver nodded uncertainly, closed the doors, and drove slowly forward, glancing back at his passenger every few seconds.

Entering the monorail was much easier; the substation the bus dropped him off at was virtually deserted, and he managed to find an empty car.

He unwrapped the mysterious creature a bit when they were alone. "Let me look at that leg." He moved the raincoat back, without touching the wound. He didn't know what her reaction would be if he inadvertently caused her pain, but he didn't want to find out just yet.

Mostly there were scratches and cuts along her feet and legs, and also along her hands and forearms. But one of the spikes had indeed gone straight through her left foot, tearing a jagged hole in both sides. It was filled with blood and pus and made Kevin a little ill.

"We're goin'ta have to wash all your wounds when we get home. My home, I mean."

She stared at him, eyes wide and terrified.

"Look, when we clean that hole, it's goin'ta hurt a lot. You understand? Nod if you do, okay?"

After a moment she nodded.

"Hallelujah! Okay. Like I said, it'll hurt a lot. I don't want you to think I'm trying to hurt you when I clean it, okay?" She looked down.

"You understand everything I've said to you, don't you?"

She nodded again.

"Do you trust me?"

She shook her head: no.

Kevin sighed. "Pull that coat over your shoulder; your breast's showing," he said, readjusting the raincoat as he talked. "That's better. Don't want people to think you're a loose...whatever you are."

He pursed his lips and stared out the window. Now it seemed something about her was familiar, like he had heard something about her type of GMM. On the news a

while ago. Military? The Pentagon was supposed to be working with GMM's, but she hardly looked like a secret weapon. He'd ask Rob. He kept up with all this sort of stuff.

So after she got cleaned up and healed, then what? Return her to her owner. She had to be worth at least a couple hundred grand.

But what kind of owner would let her get in this kind of trouble?

Kevin stared at her thoughtfully; after a moment, she looked away, drawing the coat around herself and— And starting to cry.

He stared, open-mouthed, as a tear rolled down her muzzle, then another.

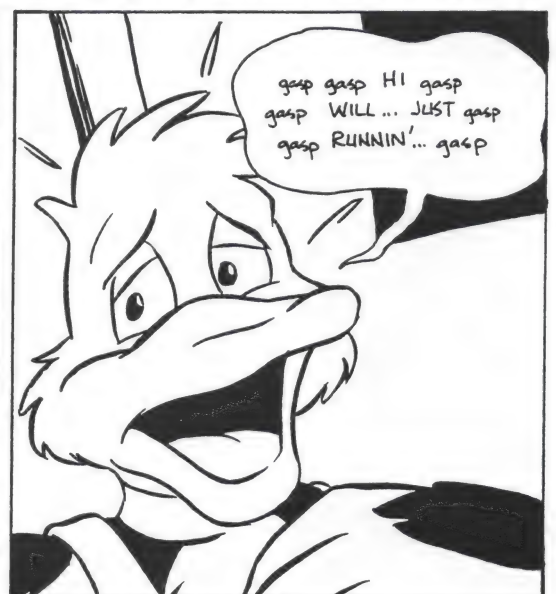
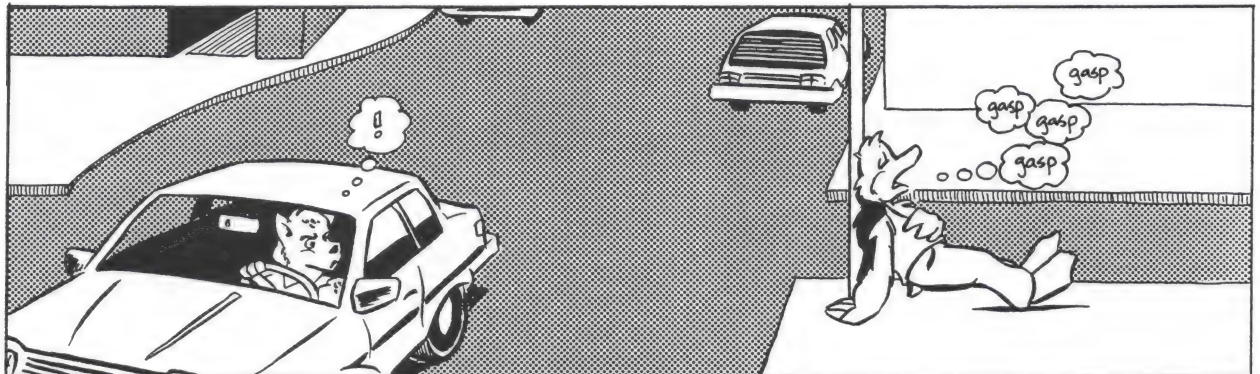
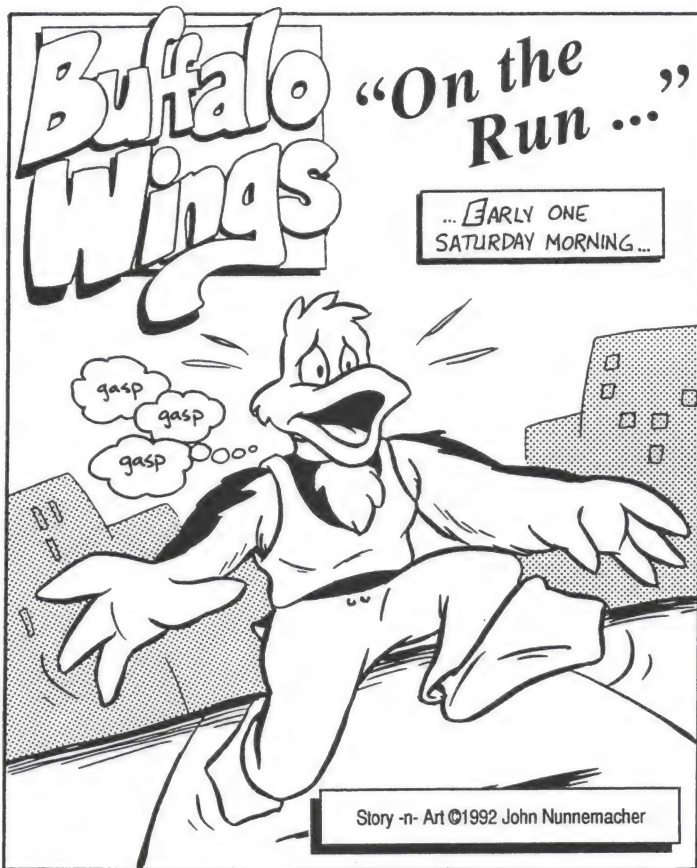
"It'll be okay," he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "I'll do whatever it takes. I promise."

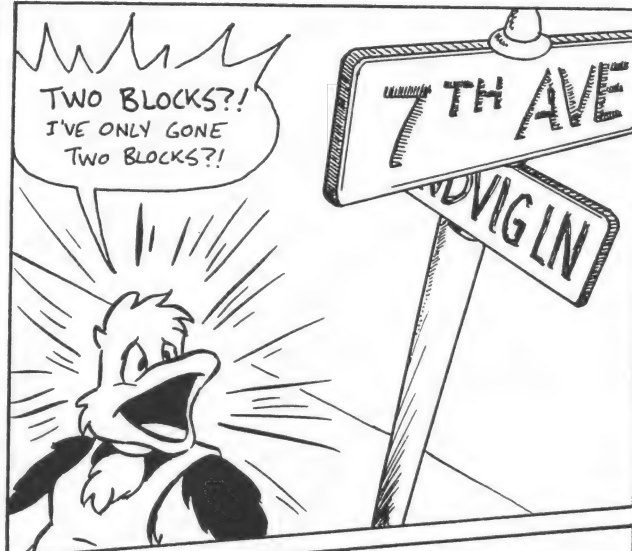
She looked up at him, sniffing, then looked away again, closing her eyes.

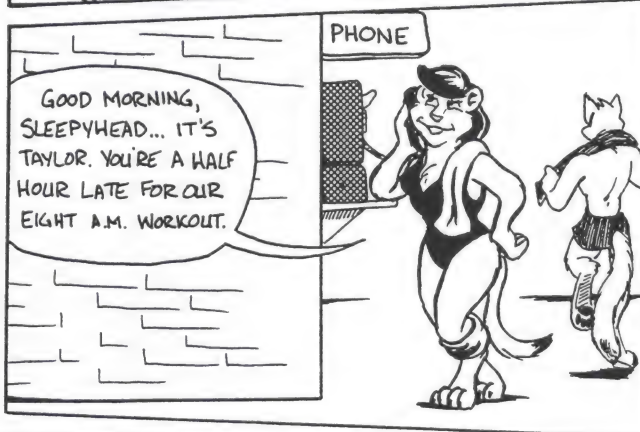


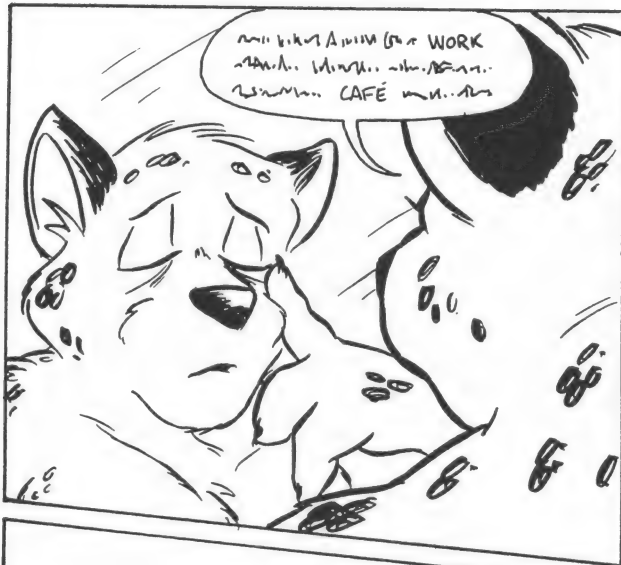


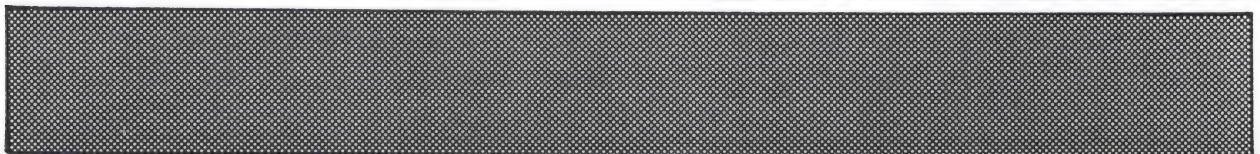
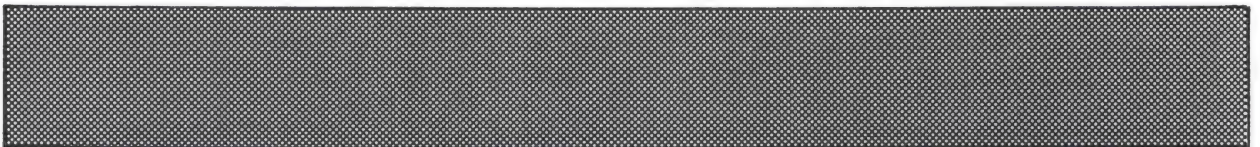




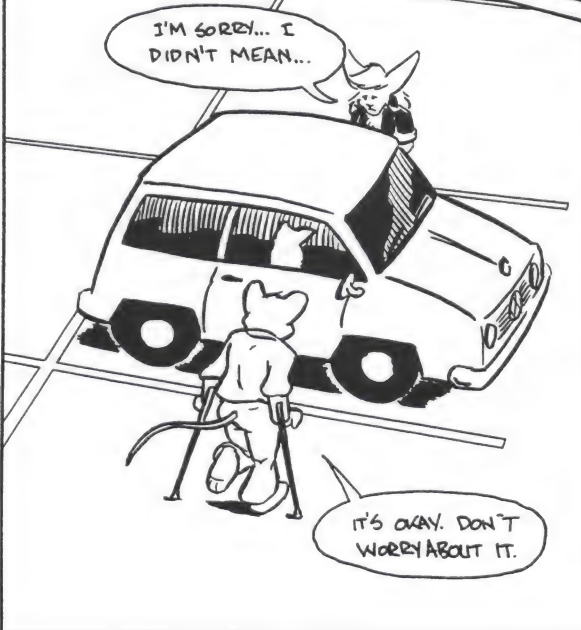
















IT'S STILL TOUGH,
THOUGH... I MEAN,
I DON'T THINK I
LOVE LISA...
CERTAINLY NOT
AS MUCH AS I —



RING
RING

HELLO? YES, HI,
MRS. WILSON... YES,
I JUST GOT THE
MESSAGE A FEW
MINUTES AGO...



WHAT? GOD... IS SHE
OKAY? ALRIGHT... YES..
YES, I'LL BE THERE
AS SOON AS... YES..
YES... BYE...

KILLIC



LISA'S IN THE
PHILLY- DOLPHIA
HOSPITAL.

SHE'S BEEN IN
LABOR FOR FIVE
HOURS.



WE'RE GOING TO
HAVE A BABY!

TO BE
CONTINUED...

Birth Is a Messy Business

by Clint Warlick

illos by Dave Bryant

A *Wormholes/Double Helix* story

□ □ □

"Birth, sex, and death: Three things that happen only once in a lifetime, only after death you're not nauseous."

—Woody Allen

Laysan Island, western Hawaiian Chain, Pacific Ocean c. 1998-2000

It was a lot easier once we learned what we were doing. Originally the decanting teams were a batch of techies trying to wrestle a hundred-pound-plus limp body out of the mat-tank. No offense intended, but most of these guys had a hard time lugging their books around. After three of the kids, the semihumans that is, got dropped and one of the techs nearly drowned in the amniotic fluid when he tried to lift one of the bigger kids out of the tank by himself, they looked for some serious help.

I'm no doctor, mind you; I'm not even a registered nurse. But after coming out of the service as a medic I was lucky enough to land a job with the company. Then, after two years of keeping my nose clean, and helping my boss out of a sticky situation that would have embarrassed the company, I was transferred to the semihuman project. They filled me in on what I was supposed to be doing and gave me a fancy title. What it boiled down to was that I was a grunt with medical know-how.

Decanting one of the "newborns" was sticky, messy, and could be a little hazardous. Doing a four-man body-lift out of a mat-tank sloshing with amniotic fluid, the floors slick and slippery with more of the stuff, is not my idea of a walk in the park. Two guys slipped and got pretty bunged their first week; one broke his arm.

The fluid had a rotten smell to it, and no matter how you tried, you got soaked. That's why we changed over from lab coats like the techies had to a loose two-piece jumpsuit and non-skid rubber boots. After each decant we stripped and scrubbed, and sometimes the smell still stayed on you. The mat-tanks were straight out of a science-fiction movie: big tubes with windows at one end, mounted lengthwise in what the techies called a "four-pack". There was a CRT monitor over each tank, and a fold-out keyboard and monitor between the tanks on each side. The terminals got

covered before we opened the tanks, to keep the electronics safe. At least most of the time.

We normally had two decant teams on duty at a time, each working one of the three eight-hour shifts in a day. Aside from the semihuman project, we had legit operations on the aboveground levels: endangered species and extinct animals were grown in these tanks. The legitimate work was a lot easier, less experimental and with a lot less to go wrong. These beasts were coming out mostly as pups. But the semihumans were full-grown adults, or near that. The biggest were a batch of female tiger types, 300-pound-plus freaking amazons! We had to double-team these darlings, and even doing one a week, we were tired and sore for days.

Occasionally we had to do an emergency decant when something went wrong with the kid, the tank, the umbilicals, or a hot-shot techie. Once just about everything went wrong. It was after my shift on a regular day, no major hassles, so I finished my shower and decided to take a tour of the tanks. I sometimes did this to see what's coming up, or just to watch the kids grow. After they washed down the tiles and the only sound was the pumps running, it was real peaceful. Anyway, I was passing down aisle C when the screen on A3C4 starts flashing blue. There was a techie at the terminal typing like mad and whimpering "No! No! No!" I looked in the tank and saw the kid going into a grand mal seizure. Normally I wouldn't interfere, but the kid just then pulled his umbilical cord loose. I told the doc to close down the terminal, that we had to do an emergency decant.

"No! I can handle it from here."

"Doc, the umbilical cord is..."

"I can handle it. I can handle it."

The doc was going into la-la land, typing like mad to correct what couldn't be corrected. So I pushed him aside, slammed the lid on the terminal, and popped the emergency catches on the tank door. Normally we drained the tank first, to make thing easier, but this time I didn't have the luxury. Out poured gallons of amniotic fluid. The

kid floated in the stuff as it drained, finally settling into the door, which had done just as it was supposed to: swing down to form a cradle. I could hear the decant team on duty rushing over with a gurney, but the kid was thrashing like mad, and I couldn't leave him. I thank God these kids weren't very strong when they were born, otherwise I could have gotten some broken bones trying to hold the kid steady. I put in another Hail Mary that I didn't need to do mouth-to-mouth. The kid started breathing after he spat whatever was in his lungs straight into my face. He then took a gulp of air, and started to cough like crazy. When the team got there, I'd gotten the preemie stable, helped the team heft him onto the gurney, and told the other techie that showed what happened. I would've liked to have busted the chops of the idiot tech who was working until I saw him sitting on the floor, curled up with his knees under his chin. His lights were on but no one was home. All he could say was, "I couldn't handle it, I couldn't handle it." He got taken away and I didn't see him again.

Not all emergency decants were that harrowing, but some stay with you a long time. One day our team got called in early. The techies had miscalculated the decanting time on several of the four-packs and the night shift crew had more than it could handle. In other words, a lot of babies wanted to be born, now!

We had just gotten one kid on the gurney heading up to ICU, when the alarm on B5D2 sounded. I sent my team on up while I headed on over to the tank. I punched up the screen for problem details and got this:

UTERUS WALL DISSOLVING EMERGENCY DECANT REQUIRED

I probably said something not too flattering and popped the catches. Fluid sloshed out and I called for backup, but everyone had his hands full with other decants. Normally I'd wait for my team to show up, but then the screen flashed: **CODE BLUE**. The kid's heart was beating fine, but she wasn't breathing.

No team, no crash cart, nada.

So when in doubt, go with what you know. I started artificial respiration.

The kid caught on on about the third time. Thank God she didn't have too much fluid in her lungs. She coughed a bit then settled down into a normal breathing pattern.

This in and of itself wasn't what shocked me. It was when she opened her eyes and looked straight at me. Now despite the fact that her eyes weren't registering me as anything more than a blur, and that she was a leopard semihuman, I could have sworn that this was my daughter. Same green eyes, same dark blond hair, same puzzled look on a recognizable face.

She was breathing fine, all right. I was the one who started to breathe funny.

The next free decant team came by and took her down to the recovery ward. My team said I looked a little shaky and asked if I was all right. I said yeah, I just needed to use the head and wash. I followed her to the ICU and got her code number off her chart: ALF-PCC-98/365. I wasn't sure why at the time.

Later that day I called my daughter. She had just completed her midterms and was doing fine, but couldn't talk. She said she'd write as soon as possible. This still didn't get rid of that uneasy feeling.

□ □ □

After lifting the kid out of the tank, we laid her (they're mostly girls) down on the gurney, clamped the primary umbilical, detached the wire umbilical, and ran her up to ICU. She'd stay in ICU for a couple of days, and after she stabilized, the wires were clipped close. Then she was put in a dorm room. The rooms weren't half bad: they got a bed with a small built-in TV/boom-box and a toilet and sink. Closed-circuit cameras kept an eye on everything. The doors were built solid, with a computerized locking mechanism. It looked like a real plush jail to anyone looking in. It was, to some extent; aside from keeping the kids in, it was to keep unauthorized personnel out.

The kids were taken individually at regular intervals into a private gym set up for them to work out and tone up. Some of the kids may have looked as if they had muscles on their muscles, but they had a hard time walking and talking at the same time just after they first came out of the tank. About a month later, though, I wouldn't want to meet most of them in a dark alley. For the most part, only security, techies, and med-techs were allowed near this area. I managed to get volunteered for guard/phys-ed duty due to a flu virus hitting the island.

One of the suits rotated in from home office to see how we were doing. He walked off the plane with a case of the sniffles, and the techies went berserk. Being a high-seated muckety-muck, he demanded to tour the facilities, and threw his weight around till he did. After sniffing and snuffling around the entire island — save for the dorms, thank God — he burped goodbye and left. Sure enough,

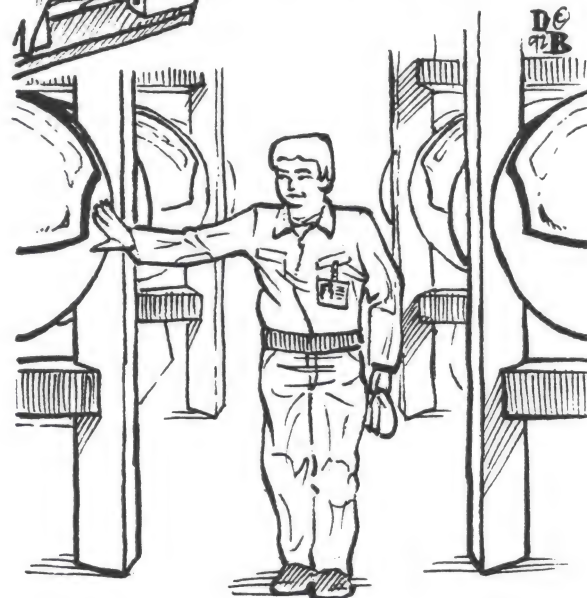
about five people came down with the flu within two days of his leaving. I was one of them. I recovered and was back at work in less than a week. Then the shit really hit the fan. Almost everyone caught the bug. A skeleton crew was manning everything, working 12-hour shifts. Being trustworthy, I was promoted to orderly, guard, exercise trainer, and every grunt job short of ditch digger. Even after all the runny noses were wiped, I occasionally was called on to fill in.

I did manage to pull a few strings to get to watch ALF-PCC-98/365 work out. The more I watched her, the more she looked and acted like my daughter. Sure she had fur, spots and a tail, but I was sure she had something to do with my daughter. One night I managed to pry the information from a techie who was drunker than a horse on rotting apples. They got genetic samples from college students being tissue-typed by the Red Cross.

Adding up a clue, a fact, and a hunch, I had a pretty good idea where she stood with me. It didn't stand well either. Not knowing yet what I could do, I sought comfort in a good bottle and a warm body.

□ □ □

Sexual morés on the island were as varied as you can get. We had everything from "I'm not interested, I'm British" celibate, to "diving off the deep end into the flesh pool" in the Thursday night orgies, to "just me and mine" couples. Being divorced and



having no current attachments, I was able to find a niche. Nothing serious, but something nice. We even had a small stable of semihumans for customers — "floor models", you might say. If I had wanted to, I could have "tried one on for size"; all I'd have had to do was call in a few favors. Even if I was desperate enough, though, I doubt I could have followed through. Something just didn't seem right, something that felt like child molesting.

Anyway, most people had, or could find, what they wanted, companionship-wise. The one exception that really sticks out is a guy we called "Double Dork". I don't now how he got the name, but it sort of fit. He was so horny the crack of dawn wasn't safe from him. He was usually late for his shift, lying about his "success", hitting on every woman, married or otherwise, on the island. Needless to say, he was an asshole of the first water.

He had gone through anyone who would go out with him, none more than two dates at most, and was having the world's worst case of blue balls. He kept on saying, "If I don't get some soon, I'm going to go blind."

"Try self-abuse."

"I'm already changing hands every fifteen minutes!"

"No wonder you're going blind."

Like I said, an asshole. However, the height of his stupidity was yet to come.

When he didn't show for work

one day, I just figured I'd give him a kick in the pants and have his pay docked. Then I got the call from security. Idiot boy got caught with his pants down, literally. He had been asking me for weeks to let him into the harem for ten minutes. I had told him 'no', 'No', and finally 'Hell No!', so he thought he would get back at me. He lifted my access card to the dorm rooms and was about to take the plunge when security showed up. He didn't even bother to look for cameras, and the video had him practically mooning one. If it had been just one of the stable, it could have been overlooked — just a severe reprimand and a six-month loss of pay. But nooo, he had to go for exotic private stock. To be specific, a certain lady leopard, ready to meet her owner in not more than a week. This called for stronger measures. I told the guards I would take care of this, and that they could wait outside; Double Dork busted out into a shit-eatin' grin, saying thanks. That smile disappeared when I hit him with a right cross. The guards decided not to notice until they heard his arm break.

□ □ □

From that point on, things started to go downhill; it seems to me that the raid on the island by the FBI was just the icing on the cake. Double Dork got locked up in security for the duration. Letting him go, pissed, fired, and broke, would have shortened our operation time to however long it took to spill his guts to the nearest Fed.

The leopard girl was introduced to her new owner. It nearly tore me in two to watch this, but I did, pretending to have dust in my eye. Later, I hacked into the "special customers" file, dumped the whole thing to a floppy disk, then went out and got roaring drunk. At the time, I thought this was no more than a salve on an emotional wound. I figured I would erase the disk later. At the time I had a daughter.

I never did do the wipe, though; events kept an emotional jackhammer on my nerves right up to the breaking point.

Some of the semihumans, no more than a few, had to be destroyed after decant. Most of these were mercy killings, the poor things having defects that didn't show up till a few days of exercise had loosened things up. Naturally I was given morgue detail, carrying limp forms from dorm to dissection to cremation. However, there were a couple of cases when the techies did their job too well. I didn't get to see the first case, but the one I think was the second was impressive to behold. If God had made a lion in His own image, and fashioned him of spun gold, this kid would have been him. During his workouts he would usually get a little feisty. Nothing much — a cookie and a pat on the head would get him to follow you back to his room. However, one day he didn't want to quit. We gave him ten

more minutes and he still wanted more. He was bouncing up and down, a kid with a candy-store grin, but we had to move him out for the next class to come in. The physical therapist tried to cajole him out when golden boy made a fatal mistake. He hit the trainer. He brought his fist down from on high and nailed the PT in the ribs, sending the guy sprawling. Me and my partner Murphy saw the whole thing. I hit the silent alarm and we charged in straightaway. Murphy was another macho asshole who had been messing about with his baton too long. He decided to take our boy on mano-a-mano. I pulled my taser and tried to line up a shot. Murphy should have known better: we were told to use a taser in this situation. When I thought I had a clear shot, I fired. Murphy danced around, dodged left instead of right, and I nailed him square in the back. The armor dissipated the charge, but being hit distracted him long enough for the kid to backhand him into a wall. Golden boy turned and came at me. My taser shot, I drew my baton and backpedaled like mad. He may have been only a kid, but this kid was six foot eight, and I could feel his punches through the armor. He was having fun, like a kid in a sparring match. I was shitting bricks. Then came a CLACK and that beautiful face exploded in a spray of red. The backup team had arrived. The lead man still had his submachinegun raised, silencer smoking slightly, tracking as the body slumped to the ground. After that, I locked myself in my room with a bottle until morning.

The final card was dealt when I got a phone call from the college back east where my daughter was. She had been hit by a car and was in the hospital. She wasn't expected to make it. I requested emergency leave and left that day.

I thought I'd die the day I told the doctors to pull the plug. She had been brain-dead since the day before. I felt something take a bite out of my soul when she went flatline, and another when they shut off the machines. Still another when making preparations for her burial, and a large one when they lowered her into the ground. This was the first day of May in the new century, and my little girl wasn't going to see it. What little was left was slowly unraveling. I wanted to drown my sorrows, but I still drove around for an hour before hitting the first bar I saw. It was noon and I ordered a double anything. The TV was on CNN and it looked like a war was going on. The barkeep turned up the sound. Bernie Shaw's mellow voice boomed in the already smoky room.

"...is with us live from Laysan Island. The FBI is making a raid on an illegal genetic engineering operation. Island security is resisting with smallarms, and..."

The last little bit of reality had been torn away from my world. I don't remember what happened next. I don't

It took nearly a month to find a real reason for living, and when I found it, I grabbed hold with both hands. I bought a new I.D. and a new background. 'Mike Hansen', nice, vanilla, and unassuming. I equipped myself and headed out.



Hi, I'm Avi Melman, author
of Nitrocoon, perfectionist
and all-around egoist.
Oh by the way,
this is Dave.

Oh
Boy

Artist



They say I've reached that
point in my life when one
has to decide what one
will do in one's life.

**SO THEY
SAY.**

He
SCARES
ME!!



**Some people
become rich
and famous.**



**Some become
pioneers in
their field.**



**As for me, I've
thrown my
WHOLE life away!**



Budget Cuts



**I'm a
BIO MAJOR!**

I knew I
shouldn't have
come to lab
today.



WE ARE EXPERIENCING
TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY
AT THIS TIME
BUT...



WELL
BE
CRACK...
So you noticed.

sarcasm & sideart by Avii.

NitroCoon & Suzy Anderkard © 1991,92 Avi Helman WITH ISSUE # 3 OF NITROCOON! //NEXT EDITION//



RALPH THE UNDER HAMSTER

IN THE SONIC TOADS PART 2

STORY BY JIM ALVES
INKS BY ROY D. POUNDS II

© JAMES W. ALVES
SO THERE! MHAH!

THE STORY SO FAR: HUH?!
WHAT?! YOU DIDN'T GET THE
LAST ISSUE?! GO BACK TO YOUR
"FRIENDLY" YARF DEALER AND
COUGH UP! **GOOD!** NOW THEN:

SOMEHOW WE SURVIVED THE
NEAR MISS, BUT WE WERENT
OUTTA THE WOODS YET!

WE'D BEST
HIKE OUR
SKIRTS UP-
AND GET
OUTTA HERE!

NOW WHAT?

BEEP! BEEP! BLEEP! BEEP!

!S LYHL SYM OHM

OH NO RALPH! YOU
FORGOT TO FILL THE
TANK BEFORE WE LEFT!

YIKES!

I GOT A READOUT
ON OUR BENEFACITOR!

I HOPE HE'S
CUTE!

SAME HERE

WHO EVER THAT WAS-
I'M GONNA GET THEM!

AFTER WE GETS REPAIRED:

BACINE, ANYBODY!

WHEEZE!

WHAT NOW?

SPUTTER!
GASP!

NOW WE COAST...

IT LOOKS LIKE A...
..... HAMSTER.....

EEEUUUHHH...!

WELL, I GUESS I'D BETTER USE THE C.B....

BREAKER-BREAKER 10-99
ANYBODY COPY? WE'RE OUTTA
GO-JUICE, AND DRIFTING
TOWARDS AN 8-BALL-COPY?

8
RALPH!

SIR, I DON'T THINK
HE'S GONNA LIKE THIS
GASP! CHOKE! - PLOP
ADMIRAL?

10-4 little buddy
we're kinda busy-
but'cha got an all
nighter ahead -
good luck - out

THANKU
BIG HOOK!
OVER-N-OUT

SLIMY SAM'S
NEXT EXIT

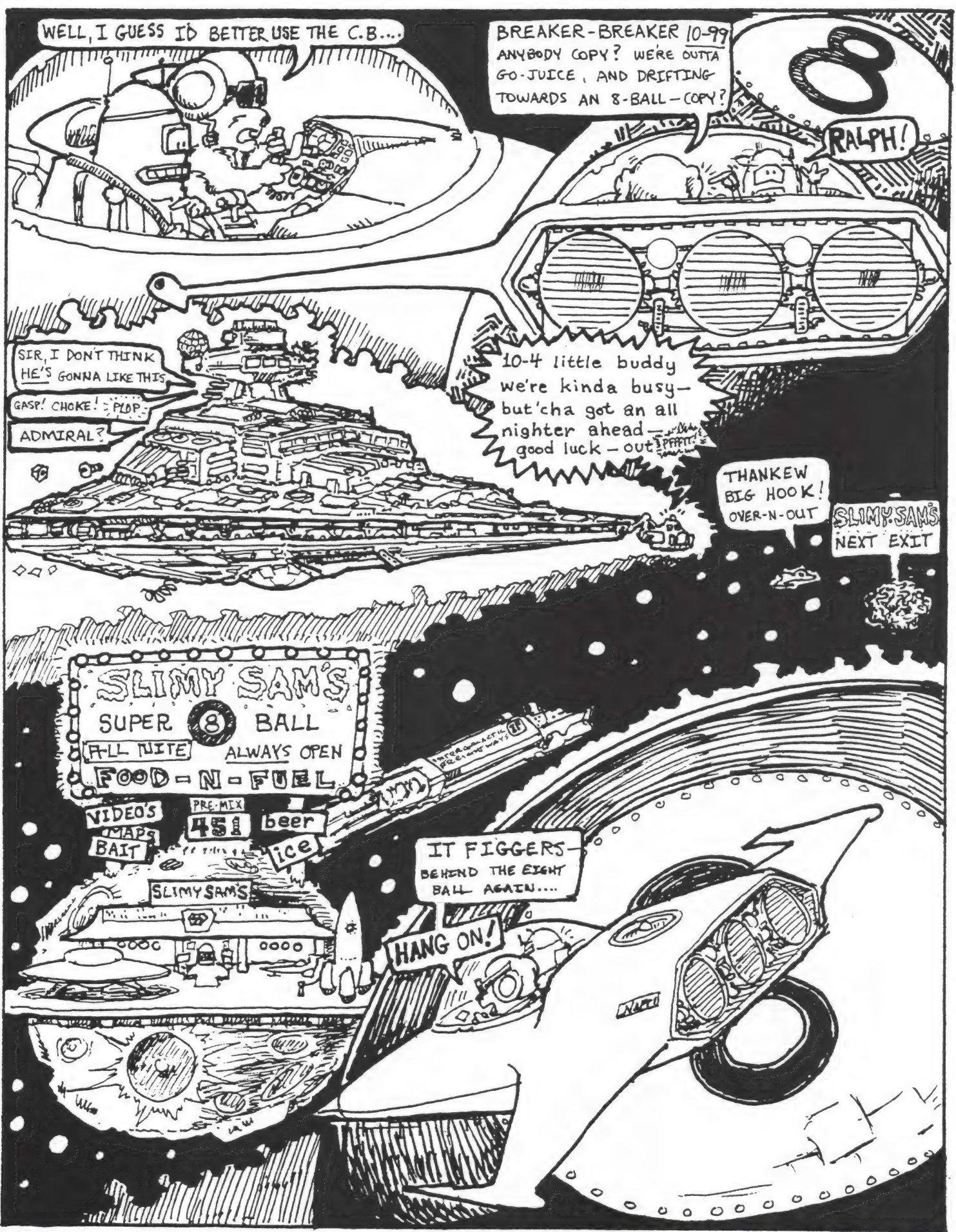
SLIMY SAM'S
SUPER 8 BALL
ALL NITE ALWAYS OPEN
FOOD-N-FUEL

VIDEOS
MAPS
BAIT
PRE-MIX
451 beer
ice

SLIMY SAM'S

IT FIGGERS-
BEHIND THE EIGHT
BALL AGAIN....

HANG ON!







THEY'RE GETTIN' AWAY!

BATT

POW!

BLAST

NNYREEEEE!

BANG! BA-KOOMPH!

FA-B

WHOOSH-WHOOSH-WHOOSH!

BOY, THAT WAS CLOSE!

...YOU OKAY?

MMMPH!

SPARE GLASSES

WATCH IT-
YOU
ROAD HOG!

SHOOT HIM!

WITH WHAT?
PEASHOOTERS?

NOT AGAIN!

HELLO, ARMYNA

ANIEE-
ANIEE-
ANIEE

OMG!

OMG!

BOY, SOME PEOPLE DON'T KNOW
THE RULES OF THE ROAD...

WE'D BETTER CHECK
THAT MAP...HERE...

TUNE IN NEXT TIME : FOR THE CONTINUEING
STORY OF RALPH THE WANDER HAMPSTER
(WE HOPE!!) really!





ART & ALL... CHRIS GRANT

©1992 By CHRIS GRANT

EMPIRES

BEHIND THE SCENES

One oft-asked question is, "What are all these different species? Well, here's a chart that shows all the EMPIRES species, and the Terrestrial creatures they are based upon.

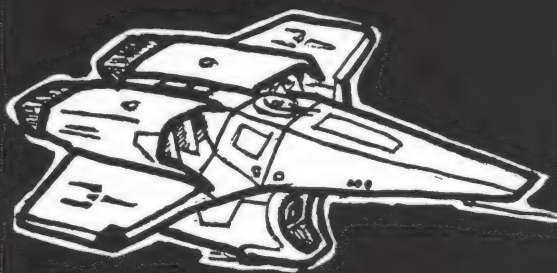
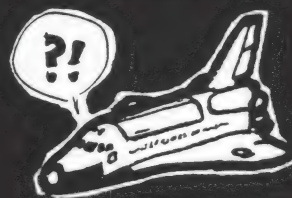


EMPIRES SPECIES	TERRESTRIAL SPECIES
Vulpinaa-----	fox
Feliscii/An-Feliscii/Eti-Feliscii-----	cats (all kinds)
Hinichi-----	wolf
A'Kii-----	wolf
Wanni-----	sable
Q'Aab-----	jackal
Jeur-----	mice/rats
Ellerao-----	rabbit/hare
Humanity-----	Humanity
Ghuun'Akhschaa'-----	(none-- alien species)

I have pretty much stopped developing any more "furry" aliens and am now working on expanding my truly alien species, to include various lizard-like creatures.

Some of you have asked, "what role does Earth play in this story?" Answer: none at all. The EMPIRES peoples developed on the other side of the Milky Way, which they commonly call the Iriesii Galaxy.

They do not even know Earth exists, and I haven't decided what stage of history Earth would be at if it did exist in the EMPIRES continuum.

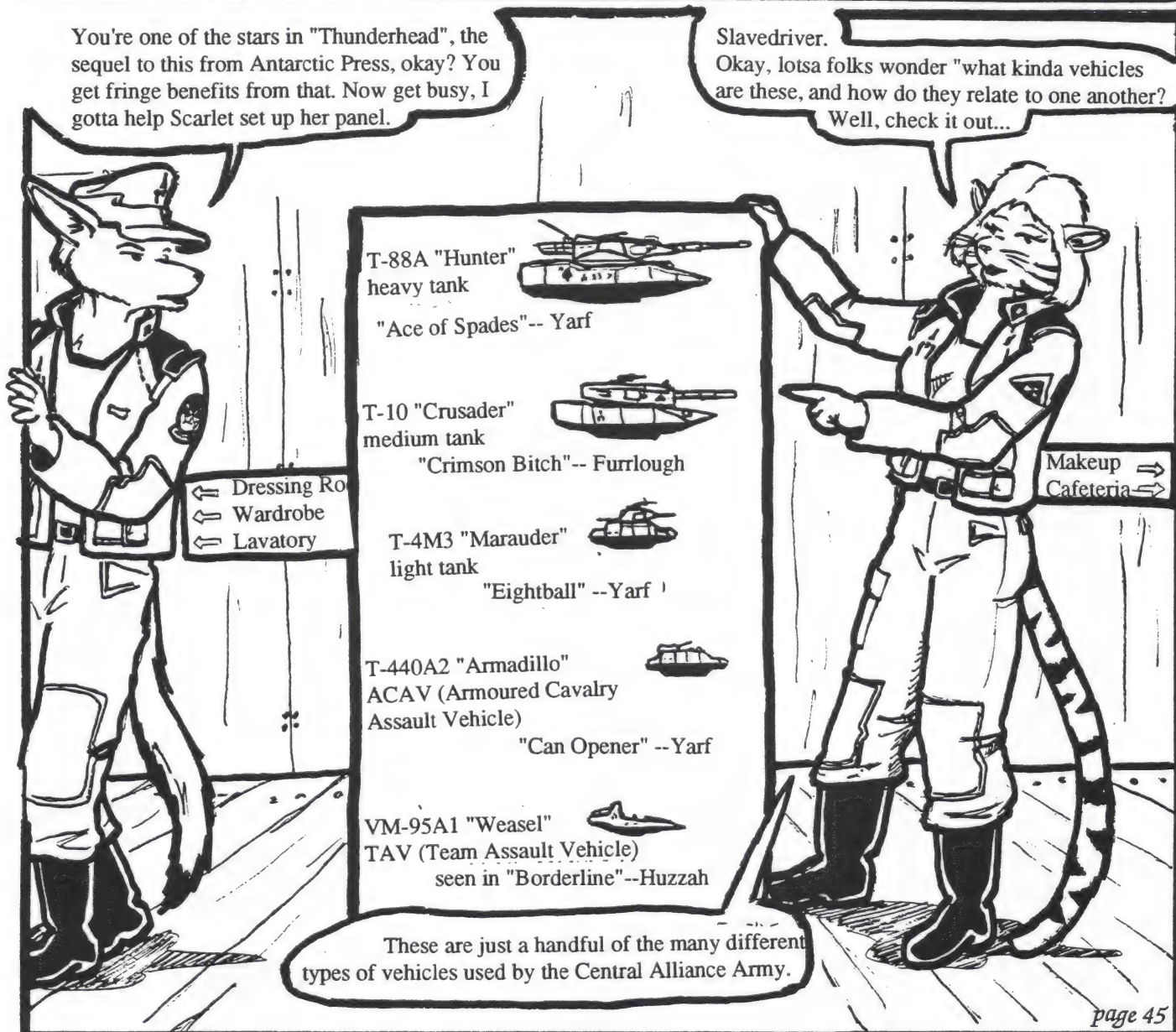


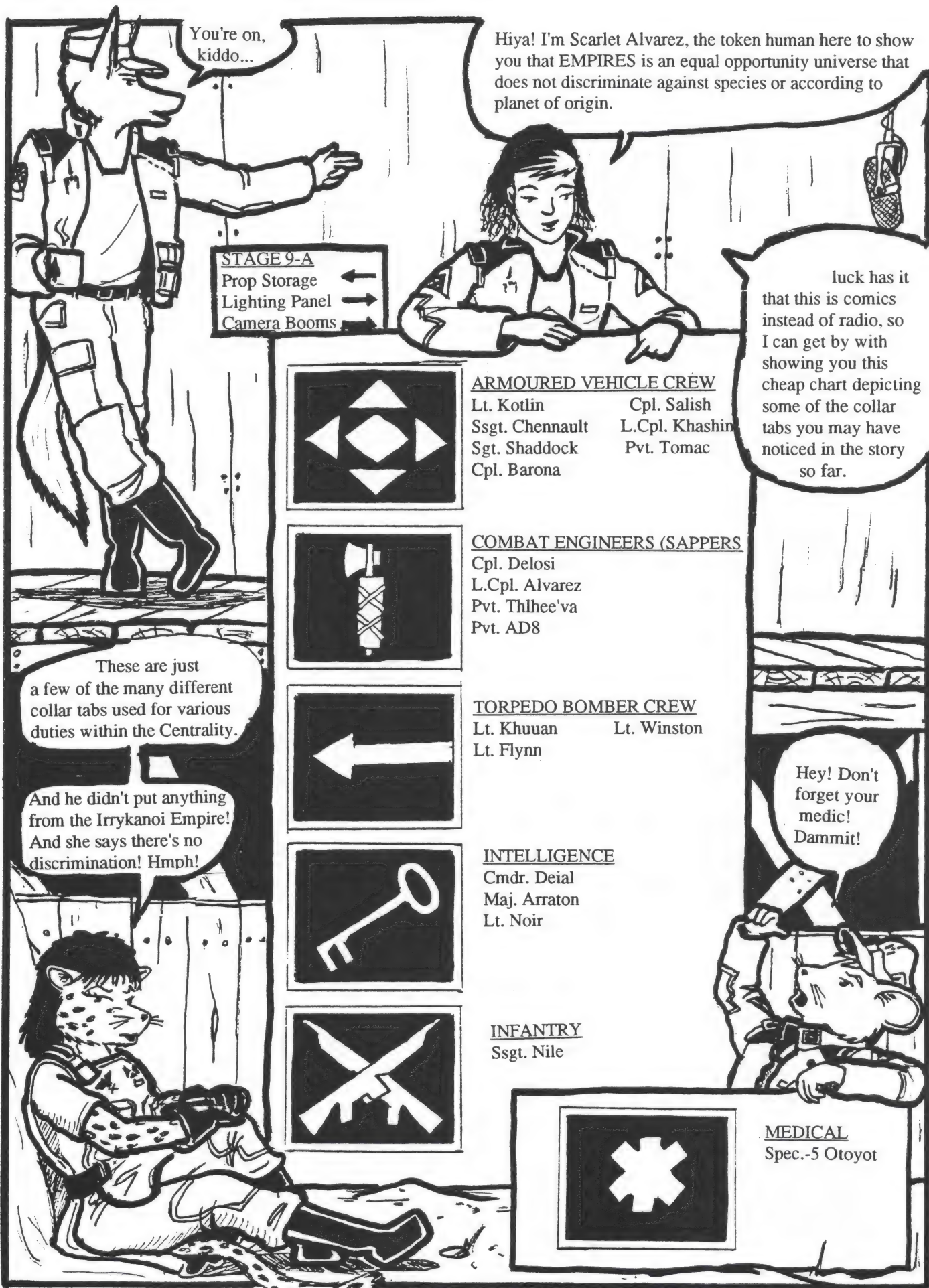
EMPIRES has nothing to do with any other universe. It is not related in any way to Star Wars, Albedo, or others.

Now... I promised long ago to outline the rank insignia. Here is the rank structure of the Central Alliance Army. I will feature Navy and Imperial rank structures later.



[ENLISTED/NGO]		[OFFICERS]	
	private		squad sergeant
	senior private		field sergeant
	lance corporal		company sergeant
	corporal		sergeant major
	sergeant		command sgt. major
			colonel
			major
			captain
			lieutenant
			junior lieutenant
			general
			forcecom general
			corps general
			sector general
			command general
			field marshal





You're on, kiddo...

Hiya! I'm Scarlet Alvarez, the token human here to show you that EMPIRES is an equal opportunity universe that does not discriminate against species or according to planet of origin.

STAGE 9-A
Prop Storage
Lighting Panel
Camera Booms

luck has it that this is comics instead of radio, so I can get by with showing you this cheap chart depicting some of the collar tabs you may have noticed in the story so far.

These are just a few of the many different collar tabs used for various duties within the Centrality.

And he didn't put anything from the Irrykanoi Empire! And she says there's no discrimination! Hmph!

Hey! Don't forget your medic! Dammit!

ARMOURED VEHICLE CREW

Lt. Kotlin	Cpl. Salish
Ssgt. Chennault	L.Cpl. Khashin
Sgt. Shaddock	Pvt. Tomac
Cpl. Barona	

COMBAT ENGINEERS (SAPPERS)

Cpl. Delosi
L.Cpl. Alvarez
Pvt. Thlhee'va
Pvt. AD8

TORPEDO BOMBER CREW

Lt. Khuuan	Lt. Winston
Lt. Flynn	

INTELLIGENCE

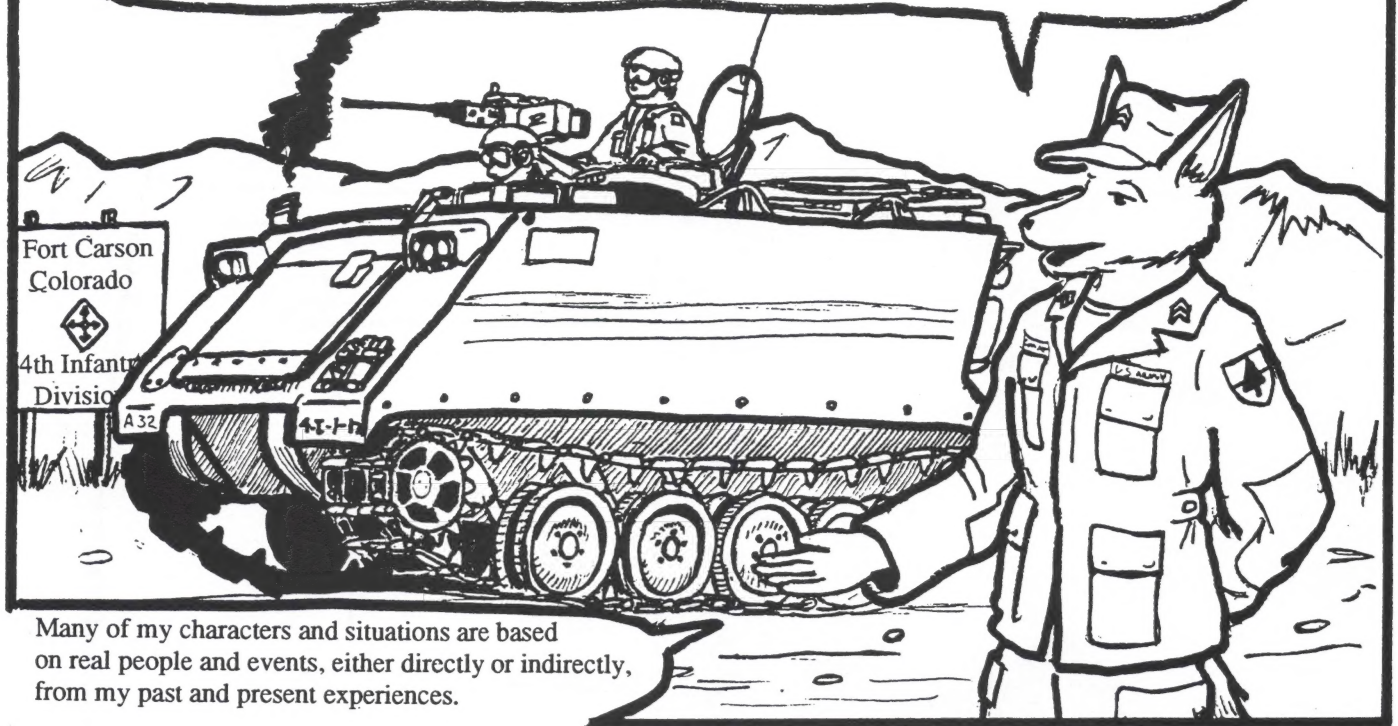
Cmdr. Deial
Maj. Arraton
Lt. Noir

INFANTRY

Ssgt. Nile

MEDICAL
Spec.-5 Otoyot

And finally, I have been asked, "Have you ever actually served in the military? The answer is yes, I have. Two years active duty in the US Army, four years Reserves, and now in the National Guard. Most of my time has been in the Infantry, although I have worked in Intelligence as an illustrator and in Supply. I now drive M-1 tanks for the Idaho Army National Guard.



Many of my characters and situations are based on real people and events, either directly or indirectly, from my past and present experiences.

Well, enough for now. Write to me at 1704 Malad Circle, Boise, ID. 83705. Tell me what you like or don't like about the story, and watch for "Thunderhead" in the pages of Furrllough, the new anthology from Antarctic Press. Hope to hear from you... And don't worry, all this lavish fame and fortune won't change my humble lifestyle one bit. Aloha!





"Winter's Block"

The Last Bits

DISPATCHES FROM THE ELECTRONIC FRONT

Just some updates this tie around. With the help of Jesse Means at the Jefferson BBS.

With some luck we hope to have a local message base set up on the Wandering Wolfs Den, here in Portland some time this summer. Watch this space or Fur-Net for details.

Remember you can alway reach us at:
KrisK@Apple.com, from the internet and America Online.

Fur-Net Bulletin Boards:

<u>Station Name</u>	<u>Sys-Op</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>Baud Rate</u>
Stormgate Aerie	Nicolai Shapero	310-822-6729 CALAN	9,600 (HST)
The Vector BBS	Avi Melman	213-938-4788 CALAN	9,600 (HST)
The Tiger's Den	Shayn Raney	714-530-2554 CASAN	2,400
Jefferson BBS	Jesse Means	503-280-6403 ORPOR	2,400
Wandering Wolf's Den	William Dale Allen	503-246-3684 ORPOR	2,400
Kitty's Sandbox	Kathleen McDonald	602-829-7522 AZPHO	2,400
The Polar Den	Darrel Exline	214-361-8992 TXDAL	9,600 (V32)
Palindrome Opus	Shalanna Collins	214-437-2734 TXDAL	9,600 (HST)
The Information Society	Tyler Robenson	813-378-2218	2,400
Shadowfox/Furverts 3	Patrick Swift	510-452-3551 CAOAK	9,600 (V42)
ClawMarks	Karl Mauer	510-452-0350 CAOAK	9,600 (HST)
Dragons Caave	Bruce Lane	510-549-0311 CAOAK	2,400
The Phoenix Nest	Charlie Kellner	415-738-0797 CASFA	2,400
The Otter's Holt	Jerry Case	714-986-1525 None	9,600 (HST, V32)
NVARNG	Brion Lienhart	702-887-7352	2,400
The Trap Line	Ken Rosser	416-766-2207	9,600 (HST, V42)
The Time Machine	Betty Dendekker	804-599-6401	9,600 HST, Dual)
USS Scorpion NCC4017	Dennis Fowler	904-678-3503 None	9,600 (HST)
Pagan Rites BBS	Don Hoffmeier	813-932-6840 FLTAM	9,600 (Dual)
NUL 1	Jan Maaskant	512-615-6851	9,600 (HST, Dual)

Other Systems

The Tiger's Den II	Andre Johnson	714-534-9074 CASAN	9,600 (HST, V 32, 2 Lines)
The Electric Holt	Grenald & DeWeese	215-387-4326 PAPHI	2,400
Yellow Submarine		415-481-2806 CAPAL	
Ophiophile Opus		215-279-9799 PAPHI	

MUDs/MUCKs

<u>System</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Port</u>	<u>Notes</u>
FurryMUCK	128.2.254.5	2323	The first a largest furry-populated MUCK. Often over 100 players logged in simultaneously. To get a character, e-mail to ss7m@andrew.cmu.edu
Tapestries	128.2.254.8	2069	Send e-mail to Ronni@gliu.biostr.washington.edu to get a character.
Time Traveller	128.95.10.119	4096	Not exclusively furry-oriented, but is the most-often used MUCK by furry fans when FurryMUCK is unavailable. Open system (no registration needed).
HoloMUCK	128.135.120.46	5757	Login as guest, regostration info available there.
PernMUSH	143.166.224.78	4201	DragonRiders of Pern theme (strongly enforced). Login as guest for information on how to get a character. Very busy system.
Tiny TIM	128.153.48.3	5440	Open system. Multi-themed, but furry-folk are to be found.



THE NEW YARFIER

